Randolph-Sheppard National Online Training Curriculum for Program Staff:

Findings from a National Survey of R-S Directors

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The Randolph-Sheppard (R-S) Business Enterprise Program (BEP) provides employment for more than 2,300 entrepreneurs who are legally blind nationwide. Moreover, these entrepreneurs employ an additional 14,000 of whom almost 2,000 are visually impaired or have other disabilities (Rehabilitation Services Administration [RSA], 2010). With annual program sales of more than $800 million, the average annual income of individual entrepreneurs is approximately $60,000. Signed into law in 1936, the Randolph-Sheppard Act (20 U.S.C. §107 et seq) grants individuals who are legally blind the authority to operate food service facilities on federal property. With oversight from RSA, the Act locates the State Licensing Agency (SLA) for the program in the individual state vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies across the country. Over the years, the R-S program has changed dramatically from single vendor-managed concessions and newsstands to large military food service facilities, kiosks, convenience stores, laundry facilities, restaurants, snack bars, automated vending machine operations, and other similar businesses.

For a number of reasons, the R-S program has seen a decline in the last two decades in the number of facilities and blind entrepreneurs. Speculations for the decline include the closing of marginal or unprofitable R-S facilities by SLA administrators without establishing new, more profitable locations, and the inability to find qualified candidates to replace those who retire, leave the program, or promote to other facilities (Schaefer, 2003). Moore (2005) further suggests that the disparity among states in either having too many facilities without qualified candidates to run them or too many qualified candidates without locations to place them, coupled with the

inability of blind entrepreneurs to easily transition across state R-S programs to align these

disparities, is also a contributing factor to the overall decline.

In an effort to expand and improve the effectiveness of the R-S program, stakeholders

(e.g., the National Council of State Agencies for the Blind [NCSAB], consumer groups, SLA

administrators) in collaboration with RSA joined together in the development of five

performance goals (R-S Performance Goals, Objectives & Measures, 1997). Goal 3 addressed

national training initiatives including the development of training for R-S staff. More recently,

the NCSAB passed Resolution #2010-1 (2010) noting that the 1997 goals had not been

accomplished and calling upon RSA to make resources available to initiate activities in reaching

goals. Our purpose is to report research activities in support of Goal 3 that will culminate in the

development of a national online training curriculum for R-S staff.

SLA staff specifically responsible for its R-S program generally include a program

director responsible for overall program management; business consultants

(counselors/specialists) having multiple responsibilities in direct support of the individual

entrepreneurs; and other administrative and support staff responsible for activities related to

equipment, initial and upward mobility training, accounting, payroll, contracts, etc. The only

national training package developed for R-S staff was funded by RSA during the 1980s.

Published in 1985 by the West Virginia Research and Training Center, the Randolph-Sheppard

Management System (Minton, Spann, & Weston, 1985) is a self-instructional training package

that includes 15 modules. The modules address different aspects of the program such as

management of facilities, new facility development, merchandising, food safety, purchasing, the

R-S law, and working with individuals who are blind. However, substantial changes in the food

service industry during the last two decades have resulted in decreased relevance and

comprehensiveness of some topics included in the package.

The last national survey that addressed training needs of R-S staff was conducted in the

late 1990s (Moore, 1999). From a list of six broad areas, business consultants identified topics

such as business operations, marketing fundamentals, and human relations skills as most

valuable to include in a training program for staff. Given the need for more current data, a

national survey of directors of R-S programs was conducted to identify the training needs of their

staff and their receptiveness to an online training format. Findings from this survey will be used

in development of a national online training curriculum and are reported in this research report.

Method

Participants

Survey respondents were state directors of the R-S program or their designee. Requests to

complete surveys were sent to directors in all states, the District of Columbia, and territories with

R-S programs. Responses were received from 44 of 52 state directors (or their designee), a

response rate of 85%. Fifty-nine percent reported being male; 18% legally blind or visually

impaired; 86% White, non-Hispanic; 12% Black, non-Hispanic, with the remaining being

multiple race/ethnicity (n=1). The majority of respondents had been employed in R-S program

eight years or less; less than one year (5%); 1 to 4 years (32%); 4 to 8 years (21%); and 8 years

or more (42%). Most (82%) of all respondents had previous business or management experience

outside of the R-S program, and most (59%) had no previous experience working with persons

with visual impairments. Although the majority (64%) was not a member of a consumer group or

professional organization, 67% reported they attend Business Leadership and Superior Training

(BLAST), and 38% attend Sagebrush conferences, both consumer group affiliated. Fewer attend professional organization conferences including National Automatic Merchandising Association (NAMA) sponsored events (20%) and National Restaurant Association events (13%).

Instrument

Questions regarding the importance of 17 different training topics in the broad areas of rehabilitation and blindness; business management; products/services; and interpersonal skills were used to identify important training needs of R-S staff. A 1-to-7 rating scale was used to assess the importance of each training topic, with 1 meaning training is not needed at all and 7 meaning training is needed very much. In addition, open-ended questions regarding delivery of training were used to assess acceptability of, and concerns in, providing the training online. For example, respondents were asked to provide feedback on their experiences with online training, including what would influence their decision to participate in online training. Four questions were used to identify training needs specific to individuals with hearing loss (e.g., number of licensed entrepreneurs with hearing loss, number of candidates completing initial training, types of assistive technology/accommodations provided to entrepreneurs). Relevant questions were selected from a larger 75-item survey of state R-S directors that included items regarding program entry requirements, existing training curriculum, training needs of new and existing blind entrepreneurs, and recruitment of transition-aged youth. The instrument was developed by research staff in close collaboration with an expert consultant with more than 30 years in R-S management and leadership positions.

Procedures

Following review and approval by the Mississippi State University's institutional review board for the protection of human subjects, directors of R-S programs nationwide and the U.S.

territories were sent electronic mail requests asking them to complete the online survey. A

second reminder was sent approximately 3 weeks following the first request, and a third

reminder 3 weeks following the second request. All surveys were completed in a 4-month period

in late 2011.

Results

Responses from the 44 state R-S directors or their designee regarding training needs were

analyzed using the SPSS Version 20. Among the four broad categories, training in business

management (BM) was identified as the most important (M=6.00, SD=1.00), followed by

interpersonal skills (IS) (M=5.71, SD=1.35), product/service (P/S) issues (M=5.47 SD=1.44) and

lastly, aspects of rehabilitation and blindness (R&B) (M=5.02, SD=1.60). Table 1 includes

importance ratings, sample sizes, and means for the 17 specific training areas within the 4

broader categories. Two training areas received importance rankings greater than 6 out of 7:

marketing and customer service (M=6.27, SD=1.03) and communication skills (M=6.07,

SD=1.09).

Respondents were asked to provide additional training needs for the four broad categories

in an open-ended question format. One additional topic suggested for business management

training was customer relations. For product/service issues, handling cash control and cash flow

in small businesses was identified. Additional training area needs for aspects of rehabilitation

and blindness included orientation and mobility basics and working with individuals who have

mental health issues. No additional training needs were identified for the interpersonal skills

area.

The most preferred format for training was online distance learning (self-paced) (41%),

followed by regional conference (34%), webinar (14%), audio teleconference (7%), and lastly,

written training materials (self-paced) (5%). Open-ended suggestions for additional training

formats included a combination of online training, written materials, and regional conferences, a

conference where all states can compare best practices, and face-to-face workshops.

Eighty-four percent of respondents had previously participated in online training, and

77% indicated that they would participate in R-S training if it was held online. An additional

18% stated, in an open-ended question format, that their participation in online training would

depend on factors such as how useful it would be, topics covered, amount of interaction, amount

of outside work, and priority of other work demands.

Respondents indicated, in an open-ended question format, some advantages of

participating in online training include the convenience of accessing materials and the ability to

get instant feedback via end-of-section quizzes. Some disadvantages include the lack of an

interactive learning environment, the inability to get questions answered in a timely manner, the

lack of group discussion, and the difficulty in finding time to complete the training when it is

self-paced and with no deadlines.

Discussion and Implications

In addressing identified training needs, the Randolph-Sheppard National Online Training

Curriculum for Program Staff has been proposed and is being developed by The National

Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision at Mississippi State University.

Based on the results of the data, 14 modules have been proposed and are as follows (several of

the 17 identified training areas and additional training needs have been combined resulting in 14

modules):

1. Orientation to Blindness

2. Vocational Rehabilitation and How It Intersects with Randolph-Sheppard

3. The Randolph-Sheppard Act and Its Implementing Regulations

4. Active Participation - What It Is and What It Isn't

5. Assistive Technology and Its Potential for Blind Entrepreneurs

6. The Role of the Business Consultant

7. Business Principles of Managing a Food Service Facility

8. Human Resource Management for the Randolph-Sheppard Blind Entrepreneur

9. Marketing and Customer Service Relations to Stakeholders of the R-S Program

10. Marketing the State Randolph-Sheppard Program to Outside Parties

11. Teaming and Branding - A Way to Increase Income for Blind Entrepreneurs

12. Food Safety

13. Changing Trends: Meeting the Challenges of Providing Healthy Food Options

14. Maximizing Opportunities for Entrepreneurs who are Deaf-Blind

The top two specific training needs identified by respondents were marketing and

customer service and communication skills. Furthermore, the top nine rated training needs

involve the broad categories of business management or interpersonal skills. These identified

areas closely mirror the results from the 1999 training needs survey (Moore, 1999) which

identified the top training needs as business operations, marketing fundamentals, and human

relation skills. Given the consistency of these needs, over time, they are a main focus of the

national online training currently being developed, with 7 of the 14 modules dedicated to these topics.

Aspects of rehabilitation and blindness ranked among the lowest priority for training. This is not surprising given most SLA staff are business professionals working with entrepreneurs, and therefore, aspects of running a business are paramount. Moreover, R-S staff can rely on assistance from VR counselors when addressing issues relating to blindness, accommodations, and rehabilitation. However, understanding the R-S program, the rehabilitation process, the Randolph-Sheppard Act, and blindness, in general, are also critical components to assisting blind entrepreneurs excel in their business ventures; therefore, 5 of the 14 proposed modules have been dedicated to these issues.

The remaining 2 modules are related to service/product issues. The Randolph-Sheppard Program has dramatically changed over the past 20 years, embracing a more entrepreneurial spirit and with it, more diverse and complex food service operations. Furthermore, the food service industry has also progressed and changed in both business practices and technology. Therefore, updated training in these areas is necessary to maintain relevancy with the changes taking place in the Randolph-Sheppard Program and the food service industry, as a whole.

Each of the 14 modules will vary in length and content depending on the complexity and importance of the topic. Modules will be formatted in PowerPoint presentations with accompanying audio instruction to provide a more in-depth and stimulating learning environment. Each module will include a unit quiz and an evaluation component to assess participants' comprehension and effectiveness of the modules, respectively. Participants will receive electronic certificates after successfully passing each module and upon completion of all modules.

In addressing the disadvantages of online training indicated by respondents, online forums will be made available to participants to allow for interaction, group discussion, and timely answers to questions on curriculum materials. Certificates of completion will also ensure for participant engagement in training curriculum. While it is noted that online forums are not a comparable venue to face-to-face interactions encountered in conference, classroom, or workshop settings, the cost associated with such formats are not viable for most state agencies. It is important that training curriculum of this scope be available to all R-S staff so while face-to-face interaction may be the most preferable to take advantage of collaboration and group discussion, having training materials available to all is paramount. Furthermore, areas of special interest and need can be addressed at annual state R-S meetings or in special training sessions.

The Randolph-Sheppard National Online Training Curriculum for Program Staff is proposed to be completed by December 2014 and will be available at no cost to any R-S staff member, blind entrepreneur, or any other rehabilitation practitioner interested in learning more about curriculum topics.

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